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Missile tension draws Mideast lines taut

By Jonathan Broder
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JERUSALEM—The Israeli-Syrian missile crisis reflects a push by Damascus to reach strategic parity with Israel while Jerusalem tries to prevent Syria's use of Lebanon as an additional front in that drive, according to senior Israeli intelligence officials and Western analysts.

The crisis, caused by Syria's deployment of high-altitude antiaircraft missiles close to the Lebanese border after Israel's downing of two Syrian warplanes last month, has raised tension between the two Middle East enemies to its highest pitch since they clashed on the battlefields of Lebanon during Israel's 1982 invasion of that country.

Israel, using quiet diplomatic channels, has apologized for downing the Syrian planes. But with angry rhetoric, Syrian President Hafez Assad has made it clear he will not withdraw the missiles.

"Assad is letting Israel know that the party is over and he will not submit Lebanon any longer to unchallenged Israeli aerial reconnaissance," said Maj. Gen. Yehoshua Saguy, a former head of Israeli military intelligence.

Despite unsuccessful U.S. mediation attempts to defuse the tension, Jerusalem and Damascus have been careful so far not to let the crisis escalate into another round of hostilities. But behind the restraint, experts say, the two enemies are locked in a dangerous struggle for strategic balance involving political and personal factors as well as military considerations.

Assad began seeking strategic parity with Israel in the wake of the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty and the 1980 outbreak of the Persian Gulf war, which removed Egypt and Iraq, two of the major Arab states, from the confrontation with the Jewish state.

Though Damascus could not prevent Egypt from making a separate peace with Israel, Jerusalem has felt the sting of Syria's hard-line strategy on other fronts, particularly in Lebanon.

After the 1982 invasion, it reportedly was Syria that ordered the murder of President-elect Bashir Gemayel, whom Israel saw as an ally. Damascus also torpedoed an Israeli-Lebanese agreement that would have given Jerusalem political rewards in return for a troop withdrawal. And it was the Syrian-backed Shiite resistance that finally drove the Israelis out of Lebanon earlier this year.

Israel is still considered militarily superior to Syria and could be expected to win any new round of fighting. But Syria's huge weapons acquisitions from the Soviet Union since 1982 have narrowed the gap considerably, promising to make Israel pay dearly for its victory.

Israeli and Western analysts believe that once Syria has attained strategic parity with Israel, particularly in its ability to restrain Israeli air power, Damascus is likely to launch a limited offensive against the Jewish state. They say the aim of such an offensive would be to bloody the Israelis, perhaps to recapture occupied Syrian Golan Heights territory and then to enter peace negotiations from an improved position of strength on the battlefield.

"The minute they [the Syrians] believe they have attained strategic parity, it is possible that they will entertain other thoughts as well," Prime Minister Shimon Peres warned last week.

Moreover, Syria's timetable is believed to be closely linked to the progress of current efforts toward peace talks among Israel, Jordan and the Palestine Liberation Organization of Yasser Arafat. Syria strongly opposes the joint Jordanian-PLO initiative as a sellout of the hard-line Arab front.

As the leader of that front, Assad appears prepared to launch a limited war against Israel to upstage the more moderate Arab states and scuttle the peace overtures before they can reach a settlement that would exclude Damascus.

"The Syrians are definitely headed toward a military offensive against Israel," said one senior Israeli intelligence official who is a specialist on Syria. "Exactly when that will be is impossible to say, but we believe that the closer we get to negotiations with Jordan, the closer we get to war with Syria."

The deployment of the missiles in an arc around Lebanon's northern border is seen here as the first step in Damascus' strategic challenge to the Israelis. Until the missiles were moved into place, Israel enjoyed unquestioned freedom of Lebanese skies to fly reconnaissance patrols over the eastern Bekaa Valley, where 25,000 Syrian soldiers are stationed under an Arab League mandate.

The purpose of Israel's reconnaissance flights was to make sure that the Syrians and the radical Palestinian groups under their control aren't transforming the Bekaa into an extension of Syria's front against Israel. Now, Israel's military leaders acknowledge, the missiles have curtailed the ability of those patrols to collect intelligence.

Thus, the missile umbrella may have effectively removed the Lebanese square from Israel's strategic chessboard, Western analysts say.

Israeli analysts fear the current crisis could grow worse if Israel decides to remove the existing missile batteries with an air strike. Such a move would give Syria the pretext to move in even more sophisticated missiles, which in turn would raise the stakes for any further Israeli air strikes.

"In the confrontation between Israel and Syria, the military balance essentially equals the missile balance," said one Western military expert. He noted that Syria's missile arsenal, which includes the latest Soviet surface-to-air and surface-to-surface models, already surpasses that of Israel.

In an effort to broaden the scope of the confrontation, senior Syrian officials have been holding talks recently with their Jordanian counterparts. Officially, the meetings are aimed at improving bilateral ties after almost a decade of frozen relations.

But in reality, Damascus is trying hard to persuade Jordan's King Hussein to drop his current peace initiative with Arafat and join the hard-line Arab front in its demand for an international peace conference. Such a conference would be based on the toughest of preconditions—total Israeli withdrawal from all occupied Arab territory and agreement to the creation of an independent Palestinian state.